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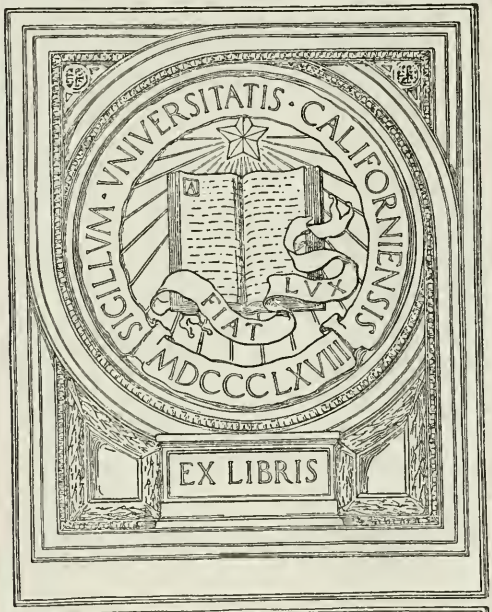

SOME BRITISH INNS.

2.—The Mermaid Inn, Rye.

BY

A. G. Bradley.

The True Temperance Association,
Donington House,
Norfolk Street,
Strand,
London, W.C. 2.

Price Fourpence.

THE series of brochures, of which this is the second, is designed to remind the public that the British Inn has its own genius, that at its best it is one of the finest of the world's social institutions, and that in connexion with modern public-house improvement the British tradition, rather than the foreign café type, is most worthy of being followed.

THE MERMAID INN AT RYE.

This is the finest of many fine old houses in the most picturesque old town in the South of England. The first statement admits of no doubt. No one who has ever seen Rye and knows his England would dispute the latter. Of all the old cobbled highways of Rye, Mermaid Street is the most admired. Lined by houses of all styles and dates, from the 15th to the 18th century, it trails its way upward from the western base of the town, displaying a fine vista of varied colouring and architecture. Half way up this street stands the *Mermaid* Inn, which gave it its name. It covers about 60 by 60 feet of ground and was built in the middle of the 15th century, after the last burning of the town by the French. Half-timbered in style, its exterior is perfect of its type, while within it is one long display of panelled walls and oak-raftered ceilings, Over the attics and the bedrooms beneath them is a very forest of beams and rafters supporting the great rambling tiled roof. The house has been to a small extent repaired and re-modelled of recent years, but mainly in the mere removal of a few partitions on the ground floor to make room for a larger lounge and a long dining room, which together run the full length of the house and exhibit the old work to great advantage. Some few replacements too have been made, but on the whole the panelled walls, of linen pattern, the oak raftered ceilings and ancient stone fireplaces, surmounted by heavy beams are of the original late 15th or early 16th century work. In the drawing room lounge, all wainscoted, is a particularly fine chimney piece of Caen stone, profusely carved with Tudor roses. Dr. Rawlinson, a celebrated antiquary who died in 1755, says that he saw on some hangings in the *Mermaid* Inn these lines :

" Tis concorde keeps a realme in stable stage
But Discord brings all kingdoms to decaye,
Since God is just, whose stroke delayed loung
Doth light at last with payne more sharpe and strong.
Tyme never was, nor never, I think, shall be
That truth unshent might speak in all things true
Spend not more thy time in idleness
But ply unto good voyages.

In the smoking room is another enormous stone fireplace, surmounted by a huge beam and with apertures on either side of the grate. The old house is a veritable rabbit burrow,

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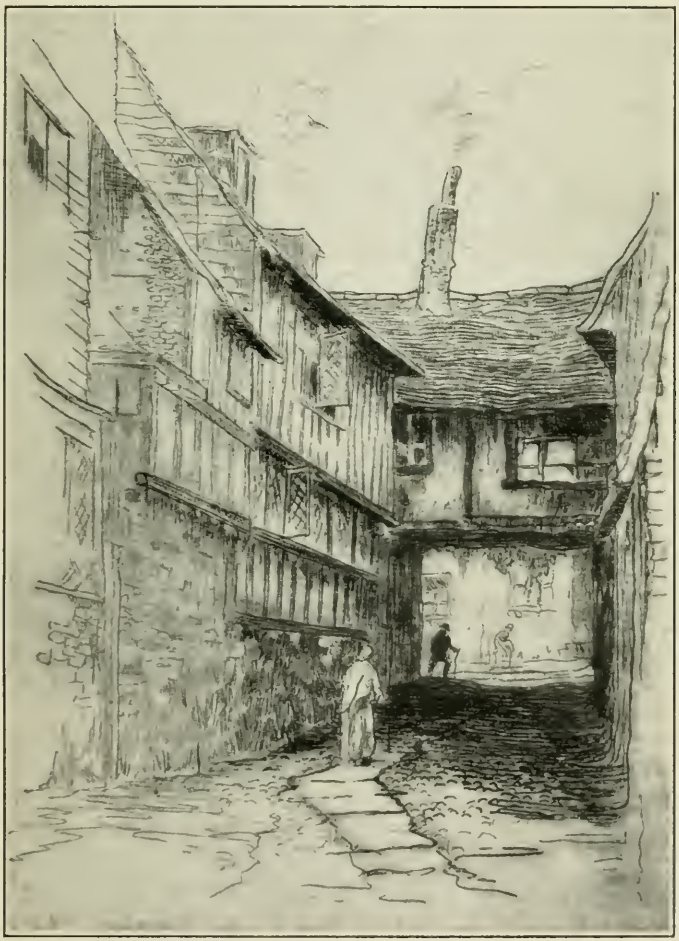
Floors are often on different levels, while nooks and corners and short stairways intervene in the most unexpected places. The large bedrooms are lighted by the old leaded lattice windows. In a small outdoor central court in the heart of the building is a fish tank, the original well, from which tradition says a secret passage leads to the church. The exact periods for which the *Mermaid* has served as an Inn and those when it was a private house are uncertain. It was an Inn undoubtedly in 1636, and it is known not to have been one either in 1758 or 1784. It was a private house again in the latter part of the 19th century, when it was taken over by a local company and transformed into a more or less residential hotel. For many years it was practically the only resort of the kind for the many visitors who now began to come to Rye, largely golfers and artists. among them a good many people of distinction. It is now in the hands of another company and run upon modern lines. Mermaid Street was formerly known as Middle Street, and in the 18th century and earlier was the chief residential quarter for the merchants and shipowners who formed the substantial class of the town. The front of the *Mermaid* in this street is not so imposing. But the building runs a long way back into an open yard and by-way and it is from there that its curious medley of stone, timber and wattle, casement windows and irregular tiled and gabled roof can be appreciated. Some of Rye's distinction arises from the fact that it stands on an isolated rock and forms in appearance something of a pyramid, springing from a plain, and crowned by its noble church. It is also of course one of the Cinque Ports, having with Winchelsea, which faces it two miles away across the levels, been added to the original five ports in the twelfth century—Hastings, Dover, Hythe, New Romney and Sandwich. In technical terms the confederacy was known as "the Cinque Ports and the two ancient towns of Rye and Winchelsea," though already the inclusion of the two last was complete. Three rivers meet under the rock of Rye. The chief one, the Rother from the east, ran into the sea at New Romney in the thirteenth century. But the famous and fearsome tempest of 1287 which destroyed the old Winchelsea, blocked up the old mouth of the Rother and shifted it ten miles to the westward, where it now runs from Rye to the mouth of Rye Harbour. After the conquest the English Channel became practically an Anglo-Norman lake, and too strongly protected for much alien harrying from East or West. But when England

and Normandy fell apart and Anglo-French hostilities seriously began, about John's time, Rye and its neighbours had their hands full. The Cinque Ports ships from the Conquest on had formed the Royal Navy. They were bound on summons to turn out to fight for, or guard the realm, for which they received high privileges and honours. They were constantly exchanging sanguinary compliments with the French. The fine church of Rye, Norman in origin and proceeding through " transition "



An Etching by J. Hodgson.

to Early English, was twice burned by the French together with most of the town. The latter was walled in Edward the Third's time. Some sections of the wall still exist, and the noble gateway, the Landgate, still lets the chief stream of traffic into the town. Near it is a fine though small specimen of twelfth century fortification in the shape of Ypres Castle, built in the 12th century, as is supposed, by a Fleming, who was, though dubiously, made Earl of Kent. On this South side of the town, the Rother uniting with the Brede and Tillingham rolls its tidal waters through the Marsh for some two miles to Rye Harbour, a small fishing village, and ships of moderate burden ascend it to the town. Ship building of a limited but notoriously effective kind flourished in Rye from early times till some two years ago, when the rising rate of wages left no margin of profit to the builders and the Yard was dispersed. Though there are a good many picturesque old houses in Rye, the distinguishing mark of the town is its general quaintness and unusual old-world look. It is supposed by many to have a "Continental" appearance. The prevalence of red tile roofing, nearly always mellowed and often sagged by time, is extraordinarily effective. There are a great number too of Georgian fronts which conceal behind them charming old interiors of Jacobean and Tudor date. In Mermaid Street, just below the famous Inn, there is a wonderful old Tudor house of considerable size, with three gables and a great display of leaded lattice windows. It is known as the "Old Hospital," having served that purpose in some remote past, but has long been a private house and is now in perfect preservation. It originally belonged to a notable 17th century Rye family, the Jeakes, of whom three in succession occupied it. The elder earned fame far beyond Rye, since he published a copy of the Cinque Ports charters valuable to that confederacy to this day. His son, the second Jeake, had the same characteristics, for they were both sectaries, expounders, and astrologers and out for trouble all the time, which they generally found. But Jeake *Secundus*, besides being a Calvinist, was also a demonologist, a fashionable craze of the time, which it may be remembered James I made the subject of a book. Jeakes was also an enthusiastic astrologer and cast his horoscope on the slightest provocation. We know all this as he kept an interesting journal, still preserved. He also built a big stone house in Mermaid Street, which still proclaims itself by a conspicuous inscription as his work, and displays the date of

erection, 1689, together with a Latin inscription noting the state of the heavens when the first stone was laid, and surrounded by an astronomical diagram. He married the daughter of the Headmaster of the Grammar School, then aged 13. Their son inherited the mansion, but his sole claim to distinction, apparently, was the invention of a flying machine which would not fly. Almost next to this is a half-timbered private house, formerly the Traders' Inn, particularly patronised by smugglers. All these houses are close to the *Mermaid* while not far above it is the charming Georgian house with its spacious old-fashioned garden, which was for many years of his life the property and residence of Henry James, the famous American novelist. Running parallel to and above Mermaid Street along the southern brink of the cliff to which the town gradually climbs is Watchbell Street, called from a bell which hung there in the troublous days of old to warn the town of alarms from without. This picturesque cobbled street runs direct from the large square in which the church stands to the edge of the West Cliff, opening out wide views of Fairlight Hill with Winchelsea, on its own perch in the foreground. At this spot a fine modern hotel has been erected on the site of the Old Hope Anchor Inn and bears its name. At the church end of the street is presumably the oldest inhabited house in the town, as it is pre-reformation and was the chapel of a small group of Carmelite Friars, probably a cell of Newenden, ten miles inland and their first Carmelite settlement. The building has been long adapted to a private residence. The church which nobly dominates Rye from its apex, is one of the finest in Sussex. This is no place to describe churches. It is enough here that a short massive embattled tower with cap, and a wonderful Tudor clock with brass quarter boys, rises between nave and chancel on the north side. A large Transitional nave of three arcades and chancel of proportionate size, with north and south side-chapels, a South Porch and a Parvis chamber, comprise the body of the church. There are hardly any tombs or monuments of interest, Rye having been always a democracy independent of any ruling house or family. The greatest curiosity is the long pendulum of the clock in the tower, which swings over the heads of the occupants of the chancel, while the most decorative item is a beautiful modern window recently put in to the late A. C. Benson, Master of Magdalene, by his family. Near the north door of the church is an old Tudor house that once served as the Vicarage and

where Fletcher the dramatist, whose father was Vicar here, was born. While down below in the High Street is a large Jacobean building that till the removal and re-building of the school on the outskirts of the town represented Peacocke's Grammar School, to which readers of Thackeray will remember, the author sends Denis Duval. Rye, as above noted, was always a sort of little democracy, in that no big families held sway in it. The Cinque Port towns, for their services to the Crown were privileged to govern themselves with no obligations whatever to County Authorities. Nor did any feudal interests as at the other Cinque Ports ever touch Rye. Its citizens were simply merchants and skippers with the professional element necessary to every small town, all more or less smugglers. So the *Mermaid* Inn, as the finest of the old private houses, has no family history or associations with any conspicuous names in the past, though many such were sojourners there from about 1890 onwards. Of smugglers, however, it seems actually to breathe, so many holes and corners look darkly out of chimneys, cupboards and stairways. Half the big houses built in the 18th century along the coast of Sussex and Kent, it is said, were the product of smuggling. Beyond a doubt, both private owners and inn keepers in turn of the *Mermaid* were deeply involved in the chief industry of the dwellers in Romney Marsh. The shortsightedness of the English Government, which grudged a few extra thousands for an effective and sufficient preventive force for the saving of millions lost to the revenue through smuggling, is hard to understand. The difficulty of pursuit over the intricate dykes of Romney Marsh, together with the propinquity of this corner of England to the French coast, made smuggling a more real business of life here than elsewhere. The *Mermaid* Inn and Mermaid Street, as the residence of the warmest citizens of Rye, must have been saturated with the smuggling interests. There were the employers, of course, who found the money and discussed the terms of service in the *Mermaid* taproom with the reckless men who carried the stuff, risking their lives and liberty in the business, either for fixed wages, generally about thrice the farm rate, or for a percentage of the sales. Distilleries were built on the coasts of France and Flanders, exclusively for the illicit trade in gin and brandy with England. Fast sailing ships were built and used in the trade both by French and English. Pitched battles were constantly fought along the shore of the Marsh from Rye to Hythe. Long trains of pack horses, laden with

kegs sped swiftly inland in the night, clattering through the outskirts of Rye and down the main street of the neighbouring villages, when every blind was supposed to be drawn by the discreet occupants. Horses were abducted from farmers' stables and returned in the morning with a keg of brandy as thankoffering. Nor were parsons forgotten, since the towers of the Marsh churches were constantly utilized as temporary storehouses for brandy kegs. "Brandy and soft goods" from France, tea and gin from Holland, were the chief articles by which the "Traders" of Mermaid Street and the *Mermaid* Inn, while it remained one, chiefly thrived. In 1779 four million gallons of gin distilled in Holland entered England annually without paying duty. Till the early 18th century "Owling" was another lucrative form of smuggling. With a view to forcing the English people to manufacture their own wool, a heavy export duty was laid on it. But despite the heaviest penalties, the high prices paid on the Continent for English wool provoked a large smuggling trade known as "owling" for obvious reasons. All this smuggling involved continual "sea fights" as well as encounters on land between the smugglers and revenue men and ships. The landowners of Kent and Sussex made occasional efforts to check it, as the labour market was constantly upset by the demand for labourers and the high prices paid them. All this more or less ceased early in the 19th century, when trade regulations were so altered as to render such enterprises not worth the risk. When the present writer however first knew Rye there were still plenty of old men who remembered the days of smuggling. The last recorded fight in these parts was in 1838 at Camber Castle, one of Henry VIII's forts, on the Marsh a mile from Rye—when one man was killed.

At the foot of Mermaid Street, below the Inn, is the "Strand" containing some picturesque old wooden warehouses and the wharf, where the few ships that still ascend the river deposit their cargoes. There till about 60 years ago stood a second gateway to the town, which was removed as it impeded traffic. Little more than a century ago, it must be remembered the tides of the Rother channel, now long canalised, washed against the Southern fringe of the town, where all is now dry fields and houses. The whole 2 miles of flat country between Rye and Winchelsea till Tudor times and later was water, lapping up against the bordering heights that were then cliffs. A century earlier large fleets of the Cinque Ports had floated

from the foot of Winchelsea to the foot of Rye. The former re-built in 1284-88 sprang quickly to 4,000 population. Rye was smaller and contributed fewer vessels to the Cinque Ports fleets when on the war path. But in the 15th century Winchelsea rapidly declined as a port before the shrinking sea till left high and dry, while Rye remained a waterside port though with lessening facilities to this day. Thirty years ago Rye was "undiscovered." Few outside this corner of England even knew its name or where it was. Thousands nowadays pass through it and spend a few hours or a few days there, many Americans among them. It is sometimes said that there is not a house in New England that has not a picture of Rye hanging somewhere on its walls. There is now quite a large number of residents in and around the town, including many artists and men of letters. They have in a great measure saved the place by the upkeep of some and the judicious restoration of other picturesque old houses, which would otherwise have tumbled down and been replaced by monstrosities.

ROOM IN THE MERMAID INN.

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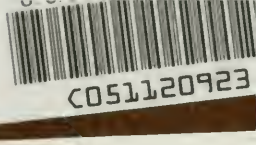
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